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ABSTRACT

When intermediate and advanced students of English as a second language (ESL) begin an English composition course, they face the task of creating logical extended discourses in English. Often, while the sentences they create are free from obvious grammatical errors, they are stylistically unacceptable, vague in meaning, misrepresentative of the message, or occasionally incomprehensible. To help the student effectively, the instructor must understand what causes un-English sentences. A useful approach is interlanguage analysis, in which errors are viewed as a sign of the learners' attempts to approximate the target language norm. These attempts are influenced by a number of factors such as exposure to comprehensible input, language transfer, and overgeneralization. In individual student conferences, the teacher can use interlanguage analysis to point out the ways in which errors indicate progress, to encourage the student to talk about the writing, and to locate possible causes of the errors. Based on the information gained, the teacher can better decide what strategy to use in helping the student. (MSE)

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Helping ESL Students Improve Un-English Sentences in One-to-One Conferences

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Helping ESL Students Improve Un-English Sentences in One-to-One Conferences

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When intermediate and advanced ESL students come to our composition classes, they face a colossal new task of creating extended discourse that makes sense in the English language. Many of them, however, aren't adequately prepared for this task. Apart from the difficulty they may still have with English grammar, their additional difficulty with managing and expressing more complex ideas is real, acute, and frustrating. They struggle, sometimes strenuously, with words and syntax to give shape to ideas on paper. They may succeed, to a moderate extent, in producing sentences basically free from grammatical problems, but the grammatical sentences they produce often seem un-English, deviant in one way or another from the normal way of expression a native speaker of English would use. Here are a few examples:

> When we were in childhood, our father brought us to his chemical lab and showed us some interesting experiments. (1)

> I read Thai newspapers for knowing what is going on in my country because I am far away from home and last month it was about the war between Thailand and Laos. (2)

> He was from Kedah, a town to the north of Penang; hence, he rarely came over to Penang--needless to say, visited me. (3)

> When I heard the news, I felt that my heart was put down. (4)

None of these sentences contains any conspicuous grammatical errors, but somehow they are not quite right. A native speaker could immediately tell there is something <u>foreign</u> in sentence (1): A native speaker would not say "When we were in childhood," and he'd more likely say "my father took us to his lab." Sentence (2) is nebulous although a patient reader may guess what it actually means after stopping to think. Sentence (3) is more puzzling. Only after I talked with the writer, a Malaysian student, did I realize that he wanted the sentence to mean that "his friend only occasionally came to Penang to visit him." Sentence (4) would defy any reasonable attempt at

deciphering it. I happen to speak the same native language as the writer does--Chinese, so I know "my heart was put down" is a literal translation of a Chinese idiom, which means "I felt relieved."

Although all these sentences are free from obvious grammatical errors, they are either stylistically unacceptable, or vague in meaning, or misrepresenting the message, or, in extreme cases like sentence (4), almost incomprehensible. Therefore, they could become a serious drawback in the students' attempt to come to grips with ideas, a hindrance to their written communication. The writing teacher could best help those students overcome this drawback by demonstrating, in one-to-one conferences, how to improve the un-English sentences.

In order for the instructor to effectively help students improve, it is important to look more carefully into the causes of un-English sentences. Problem areas in un-English sentences are analogous to errors in ungrammatical sentences in that both of them represent unacceptable deviations from the norm. In a sense, problem areas in un-English sentences are errors too, a more subtle, more complex type of errors--errors in meaning rather than in form. That is why I believe that we can borrow insights from ESL research on errors to explain un-English sentences.

After decades of intensive investigation and theorization on errors, ESL researchers have in recent years accepted Interlanguage Analysis as the valid approach to errors. Interlanguage Analysis believes that errors are signs of growth rather than failure, reflecting an ESL learner's attempt to approximate the target language norm. This attempt is affected by a number of factors, such as the amount of comprehensible input he has been exposed to, language transfer, and overgeneralizaton of language data.

According to Steven Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1980, 1981), language acquisition depends primarily on comprehensible input, in the form of reading and listening. A student may fail to express an idea in a proper way in the target language because he has not acquired the particular denotations and connotations of a word or phrase through adequate comprehensible input. For example,

> The American parents are much more tolerable of their children than our parents, who are very strict. (5)

> Among these impressionable experiences, some have had greater impact on me than others. (6)

They deal with students like their sons and daughters. (7)

(Most of the large corporations are also based in Colombo.) Therefore it is required for the people to come to Colombo for their various concerns. (8)

Similarly, a student may also fail to express an idea in a proper way because she has not been exposed the proper way of expression or idiom in comprehensible input. In other words, there is a gap in her acquired repertoire. In this case, she is likely to do one of two things. She may fall back on her native language to find a way around the difficulty (Krashen, 1984; Newmark, 1966), or she may "improvise" using whatever she knows. Sentence (4) is an instance of resorting to the native language, known as "language transfer" in second language acquisition. Here are two examples of "improvising":

(When I would try tell something, she would try her best to make sense of whatever I said.) Most of the time I explained things by my hands. (9)

He pushed his hand through my hair talking soothingly to me. (10)

Finally, an error may result from another kind of effort on the student's part. A student may make an error when, in his attempt to learn, he overgeneralizes the language data he believes he's understood how to use. For instance, one of the problems the following two sentences have is similar to that of the first half of sentence (1) cited above:

My father went to the capital for joining the conference. (11)

All of us studied very hard for entering the university. (12)

The student has learned one of the uses of "for": that is, to introduce a reason, and she overgeneralizes the usage to express reasons or purposes which should be expressed by other means.

Taking the approach of Interlanguage Analysis toward errors and understanding the factors that may lead to un-English sentences, we can better help our students improve such sentences. When we talk with a student about her un-English sentences in an individual conference, we can confidently reassure her that we are dealing with "growing

pains," which are normal phenomena in an ESL student's learning process. We can also comment positively on her hypothesizing about the target language, to encourage thinking in learning. Suppose we have this sentence in front of us:

> My lack of confidence disappeared due to my father's prompting that I should have a positive attitude. (13)

We can, with good reason, tell the student that she has managed to communicate a message, which is the primary purpose of writing. What we need to do is to improve the sentence to make the communication more effective. By providing this kind of positive feedback, we can establish a good rapport with the student, paving the way for a productive discussion.

The next step is to probe the causes of the particular problematic sentences in question, by encouraging the students to talk. Asking her to explain the intended message verbally usually could give us some clue to the causes or the strategies she uses to arrive at the wording of the sentences. If there is language transfer, you don't have to know the student's native language to detect it. "Rest assured that you can identify 'first-language interference' without knowing the native languages...of the writers with whom you work; all you have to do is ask" (Meyers & Smith, 1987). Take the following sentence for example:

> When I was sent to live with her (my aunt), my mother told her to take good care of me for my body was very weak. (14)

A colleague of mine came across this sentence in a composition by a Malaysian student whose native language was Chinese. He discussed it with the student in a conference. Not knowing Chinese, he asked her why she had written "my body" instead of "I." She thought for a while and replied that that is the way she said it in Chinese.

By encouraging students to talk, we can not only find out language transfer, but also other causes, such as overgeneralization of language data. Let's look at these two sentences:

> Because of the shortage of jobs and skilled workers because those who usually moved from the rural areas are lower educated and untrained, the unemployment rate of the cities tend to increase even faster when the city's population increased. (15)

> The people of the country though carrying out their day to day life are sick in their mind as to what the future is going to be for them in an irritating crisis like this which has no end to it. (16)

When I discussed these sentences with the writer, I asked him: "Did you find it hard to handle such complex structures?" He said, "Of course, it was very hard. But aren't complex sentences good? My high school English textbook said complex sentences are a sign of maturity." So here's the problem: he's overgeneralized a textbook rule and ended up writing involved, indigestible sentences. Then, when I called his attention to "lower educated," he instantly replied that it was based on the phrase "higher education." Obviously this is not a random mistake. It is the result of thinking and overgeneralizing.

Of course, there are cases where a problem, especially one of style, may occur without a cause the student could put his finger on. Sentence (13) might be in this category, so also might be this sentence:

> Among many people in the computer industry, popularity rose up very fast for me. (17)

In the final analysis, we can attribute the cause to inadequate exposure to well-written English prose. The student simply hasn't had sufficient input of effective English style for aquisition of good style to take place. Very often students try to compensate for this inadequacy in acquisition of style by overgeneralizing what they already know. That is why we can relate overgeneralization with inadequate acquisition and deal with them together.

After finding out the possible causes behind the errors, we are in a better position to decide what strategy to employ in helping a particular student. When the problem is inadequate understanding of words or phrases, we can help the student by giving him a few examples that can show the precise meaning of the word or phrase misunderstood. Take sentence (5) for instance. The writer has misunderstood the meaning of "tolerable," confusing it with "tolerant." We can give him an example like this: "Even a tolerant father would find her behavior intolerable." Then let the student figure out the difference between "tolerant" and "(in)tolerable." After that he would be able to revise the sentence by himself. It is worth noting, however, that we'd better suppress the urge to do semantic analysis for the student because he is not likely internalize the semantic rule you explain even if he may seem to have learned it at the moment.

When the problem is language transfer or "improvising," the best strategy we can use might be reformulating. Reformulating is rewriting the sentence retaining all the student's ideas but in the words of the native speaker (Andrea Cohen, 1985, qtd. in Murriel Harris, 1986). For example, we can rewrite sentence (4) as "When I heard the news, I felt relieved." Sentences (9) and (10) can be rewritten as "Most of the time I had to explain things by gestures." and "He ran his fingers through my hair...." In doing reformulation, we provide the student with comprehensible input which can fill the gap in his acquisition. Because the problem area is highlighted in discussion, the input we provide may receive intensified attention from the student, and as a result it may more readily become part of his acquired repertoire.

When the problem is an overgeneralization of rhetoric or stylistic rules or inadequate acquisition of effective prose style, we can reformulate the sentence for the student, or encourage the student to unlearn the rule and revise the sentence on his own, or combine reformulation with student revision. For example, we reformulate sentences (12) and (17): "I became more confident...." "... I soon became very popular among...." But sentences (15) and (16) are so involved that a reformulation could be drastically different from the student version. The result tends to be that he accepts the reformulation as better than his own sentences but still doesn't know why it is better or how to make his sentences better next time. Therefore it could be more productive if we could help the student to de-combine the sentences first, listing all the ideas contained in a typical sentence, discussing which ideas can stay together and which should be separated into new sentences (Murriel Harris, 1986, 116). Then, if he still can't manage the shorter sentences, we can reformulate them for him, which would be easier for him to absorb.

There is no doubt that, in one-to-one conferences, we can do a great deal to help ESL students improve unidiomatic sentences, by reducing their anxiety, tracing the causes and applying various strategies for enhancing their acquisition of English idiom and style. However, we have to be realistic about what we are able to do. We can't work magic. We can't expect a student to eliminate all his problems in one or two conferences. Linguistic and stylistic growth takes time. Krashen (1984) has a nice way of explaining this: "We should wait for acquisition to deal with the subtle and complex areas of syntax and organization....Large amounts of comprehensible input might be necessary before acquisition become evident." Don't worry; be patient.

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